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Progress in implementing the decisions of the Commission on Sustainable Development related to improvements in national reporting and further work on indicators of sustainable development

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present document reports on progress in implementing the decisions of the Commission on Sustainable Development related to improvements in national reporting and further work on indicators of sustainable development. Section I provides a summary of the work of the Commission secretariat in striving: to streamline reporting in order to avoid duplication with requests from other United Nations agencies; to make the guidelines and questionnaires more efficient and lessen the burden on countries; and to provide more focused information on implementation. It also reflects on the use of information in national reports as input to the preparation of the 2003 reports of the Secretary-General. Section II provides an overview of national efforts at developing and implementing indicators of sustainable development.

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I. Improvements in national reporting to the Commission

A. Introduction

1. In the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation,[1] the World Summit on Sustainable Development recommended that the Commission on Sustainable Development give consideration to more effective use of national reports with respect to means of implementation and national sustainable development strategies. In its resolution 2003/61 of 25 July 2003, the Economic and Social Council, on the recommendation of the Commission at its eleventh session,[2] encouraged countries to present, on a voluntary basis, national reports, in particular to the Commission's review sessions, focusing on concrete progress in implementation, including achievements, constraints, challenges and opportunities.

2. The Council also invited the secretariat of the Commission to improve national reporting guidelines and questionnaires with the intention of making reporting more efficient and less burdensome on countries and more focused on implementation, bearing in mind the provisions of the resolution, in consultation with Governments, United Nations organizations and secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements, and to report to the Commission for its consideration.

3. In its resolution 58/218 of 23 December 2003, the General Assembly urged the Secretariat to take due account of national reports in the preparation of the reports of the Secretary-General.

4. Over the past two years, the Commission secretariat has been elaborating a new approach to national reporting guidelines that would address the requirements outlined above and also take into consideration key concerns and recommendations of national focal points at the meeting on national reporting held in New York in February 2002.[3] The present report provides a summary of the work of the Commission secretariat in striving: to streamline reporting in order to avoid duplication with requests from other United Nations agencies; to make the guidelines and questionnaires more efficient and lessen the burden on countries; and to provide more focused information on implementation. It also reflects on the use of information in national reports as input to the preparation of the 2003 reports of the Secretary-General.

B. Streamlining

5. In 2002 and early 2003, the Commission secretariat conducted an analysis of current United Nations national reporting reports, examining: United Nations requests to Member States for national reports; national reporting carried out by United Nations-led country teams; and national information and data gathered by the United Nations system. The results of this work, made available at the eleventh session of the Commission, showed that the secretariat has been uniquely positioned to seek information on a regular basis related to: national sustainable development strategies, programmes on national indicators of sustainable development, information on decision-making structures and other means of implementation related to sustainable development. The analysis also revealed that the guidelines for national reporting to the Commission prepared prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development were too lengthy and technical owing to attempts to meet

the information needs of other United Nations organizations and agencies that were consulted on the formulation of the guidelines. It was also apparent that a number of questions in the previous reporting guidelines were too open-ended, resulting in a wide range of responses that were difficult to aggregate into regional or global trends on implementation.

6. Based on these lessons learned, the Commission secretariat adopted a more streamlined approach to national reporting guidelines for the first post-Summit reporting cycle. Thus, national reporting guidelines developed by the secretariat for 2003 were divided into five parts. Parts I to IV solicit information on: contact lists of national focal points on sustainable development; national sustainable development strategies; indicators for sustainable development; and best practices on the three thematic issues covered during the 2004-2005 cycle. The latter three parts reflect the request made by the Commission for countries to report on progress made in the area of national sustainable development strategies, indicators and, best practices.

7. For national reporting on the three themes under review, instead of formulating an extensive set of guidelines as per pre-Summit practice, the 2003 guidelines for national reporting (for the 2004-2005 cycle in the Commission's programme of work), were pared down to a generic set of national reporting parameters that can be used in future cycles. These basic parameters, originating from Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, are: (a) time-bound targets and commitments; (b) integrative perspective of the three dimensions of sustainable development; (c) means of implementation; (d) challenges and obstacles to implementation; (e) major groups involvement; and (f) emerging issues and opportunities post-Johannesburg (e.g., national/regional).

8. The 2003 guidelines also highlighted the need for the national information to follow certain technical characteristics that would allow readers and report-writers better to understand and analyse the context in which the national implementation of sustainable development activities are taking place, and that would allow the Commission better to monitor progress in the national implementation of Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and other relevant intergovernmental commitments.

C. Using existing information and reporting systems to lessen the burden on countries

9. In its efforts to reduce the burden of national reporting, the Commission secretariat has been seeking ways to maximize the use of existing national information as a basis for future reporting. As part of its preparations for the Summit, the Commission secretariat compiled a draft set of country profiles for each reporting country — comprehensive and summarized versions of the accumulated and updated national information submitted to the Commission since 1993 — which addressed all chapters of Agenda 21 and the additional themes reviewed by the Commission during that period. The draft country profiles were then sent to each country for verification and updating. Countries submitted the updates, known as the 2002 country profiles, to the Summit; they are available on the web site of the Division for Sustainable Development of the Secretariat.[4]

10. For the 2004-2005 cycle of the Commission's new programme of work, adopted by the Economic and Social Council in the annex to its resolution on 2003/61, the usual time frame in which to provide national reporting guidelines to countries and receive their input in time for consideration in the preparation of the reports of the Secretary-General was considerably less than usual. Thus, the Commission secretariat adopted a two-track approach for this cycle: (a) to assist countries in preparing national reports for the twelfth session and (b) to draw on national information for the preparation of the reports of the Secretary-General.

11. Since a great deal of effort had been made by reporting countries in preparing the 2002 country profiles and national assessments submitted to the Summit, the Commission secretariat asked countries, in preparing for the 2004-2005 cycle, to build on and update the existing information in the light of the adoption of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. To make that task easier, the secretariat undertook to prepare draft thematic profiles on water, sanitation and human settlements for each reporting country as a basis for updates. The secretariat thus focused on reviewing national information on water, sanitation and human settlements in the 140 country profiles and the 90 national assessments that had been submitted to the Summit.

12. Preparing the 2003 draft thematic country profiles entailed extensive review of the water, sanitation and human settlements information that was dispersed throughout the different chapters of the 2002 country profiles as well as the national assessment reports submitted to the Summit. The review included the cross-sectoral and socio-economic aspects of each of the themes. In the case of sanitation, since there was no specific chapter in Agenda 21, the Secretariat created a profile based on a comprehensive approach to this issue from a broader perspective than simply basic sanitation (i.e., excreta disposal systems such as sewage, latrines, etc.), to include disposal of other types of wastes such as solid, hazardous and radioactive wastes. Consequently, the thematic profiles for sanitation include the adequate management and disposal of different types of wastes with a view to minimizing harmful effects to human health and the environment.

13. Each reporting country received three draft thematic country profiles in December 2003 for update in accordance with the 2003 national reporting guidelines prepared by the secretariat. A total of 444 draft thematic profiles were drafted by the Commission secretariat. For those countries that would be reporting to the Commission for the first time, the secretariat sent the national reporting parameters to be applied in the preparation of future national reports to the Commission.

D. Use of national information in the reports of the Secretary-General

14. The Commission secretariat analysed the information it had compiled into the draft thematic profiles for water, sanitation and human settlements for each country in order to identify subregional and regional trends in the implementation of Agenda 21 and other relevant sustainable development commitments on water, sanitation and human settlements. These analyses were taken into consideration in the preparation of the reports of the Secretary-General. The draft thematic country profiles also provided information on case studies, lessons learned, constraints and obstacles for the reports of the Secretary-General.

15. National information represented 50 per cent of the information used in the reports of the Secretary-General on water, sanitation and human settlements; the remaining 50 per cent came from the regional commissions, specialized agencies and other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Given the limitation in the length of the reports of the Secretary-General, it was not possible to reflect the full extent of the country information. However, the existing national information was considered very valuable and the secretariat is exploring other means of presenting such information in a more comprehensive way.

16. In reviewing the national information, the secretariat noted the varying quality and quantity of information contained in the profiles and assessments as well as gaps or unavailability of information. There was some complementarity but also many instances of inconsistencies between national information contained in the 2002 country profiles and national assessments and that provided by regional commissions and other organizations and agencies of the United Nations system. There were also many instances of inconsistencies between national data in these draft thematic profiles and data from other sources. Since the themes of future Commission work cycles are now known in advance, the reporting countries may be able to rectify existing information gaps and inconsistencies in these thematic areas ahead of time.

17. One of the key findings of the secretariat through this review and analysis of national information was the potential for formulating projects that would respond to specific challenges and needs identified by countries within a specific sector.

E. Further efforts to enhance national reporting

18. **The Commission secretariat is in the process of making changes to the national information web pages on the web site of the Division for Sustainable Development to make the relevant national information more accessible. The secretariat is also continuing to develop a national reporting database[5] to facilitate, among others, the work of the national focal points in preparing and updating their national information to be submitted to the Commission, and the Commission secretariat's analysis of national information for the preparation of the reports of the Secretary-General.**

19. **The Commission secretariat has already begun consultations regarding the thematic cluster for the 2006-2007 cycle: energy for sustainable development, industrial development, air pollution/atmosphere and climate change, and envisages sending national reporting guidelines to countries at least a year ahead of the beginning of the next reporting cycle.[6] This would respond to one of the key recommendations of the national focal points at their February 2002 meeting.**

II. Review of work on indicators of sustainable development by countries at the national level

A. Introduction

20. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (para. 130),[1] and the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 2003/61 (para. 13), reaffirmed the importance of indicators of sustainable development and encouraged further work on those indicators by countries at the national level, including integration of gender aspects, on a voluntary basis, in line with national conditions and priorities. Furthermore, the Council requested the Secretary-General to consider progress in that regard, including further work on the above-mentioned indicators, in reporting to the Commission.

21. The following provides an overview of national efforts at developing and implementing indicators of sustainable development. The information is primarily based on the 2002 country profiles series, which includes 141 profiles. It should be noted that the guidelines for national reporting up to 2003 did not specifically ask countries to provide information on their efforts related to indicators of sustainable development. With the request from the Commission at its eleventh session, the guidelines for national reporting to the Commission, sent out in September 2003, included one part containing questions related to indicators of sustainable development (herein after referred to as 2003 guidelines). At 9 February 2004, 38 countries had sent responses to these guidelines and this information has been incorporated into the analysis below. It should be noted that three countries that responded to the 2003 guidelines had not submitted country profiles.

B. Global and regional progress in the development and/or use of indicators of sustainable development

22. This section is divided into five categories: thematic issues; institutional issues; national programmes/projects for indicators of sustainable development; information management; and challenges. It should be noted that information for the first three categories was obtained from both the 2002 country profiles and the 2003 guidelines. For the fourth category, "information management", information came from the 2002 country profiles only. For the fifth category, "challenges", information was drawn from responses to the 2003 guidelines.

23. These five categories provide relevant information with which to assess key aspects of indicator development and implementation at the country-level: (a) the specific areas or topics of indicators that countries have embarked upon (thematic); (b) the main national agencies involved and the existence of an inter-agency working group or steering committee (institutional); (c) the main national, regional and international programmes, projects and/or policies relating to indicators of sustainable development, as well as whether countries have developed and/or use a set of indicators of sustainable development (national programmes/projects for indicators of sustainable development); (d) whether countries have established web sites, databases, information systems and/or published reports (information management); and (e) the most difficult problem areas in the establishment of indicators of sustainable development in countries (challenges).

24. Of the 191 States Members of the United Nations, 74 per cent submitted country profiles and of those 84 per cent made mention of indicators. From these statistics alone, it seems clear that indicators are deemed important in a large number of countries. Table 1 below provides a regional summary of these statistics.

Table 1
Regional statistics on submission of country profiles and mention of indicators

	Countries that submitted country profiles		*Countries that submitted country profiles and mentioned indicators*	
Region[a]	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Africa	34	64	26	76
Americas and the Caribbean	28	80	25	89
Asia and the Pacific	28	62	22	79
Europe	43	93	40	93
Western Asia	8	67	5	63
Total	**141**	**74**	**118**	**84**

[a] Regional breakdowns correspond to regional divisions used in the CD-ROM containing the 2002 country profiles prepared for the World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002 (United Nations, version 0.1, August 2002).

1. Thematic issues

25. The three pillars or dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. In many countries economic and social statistics and indicators used to measure economic development and social development respectively are relatively well established. Statistics and indicators to measure the third pillar, the environment, are not that well developed. The indicators used within the environmental theme have been based on information from the 2002 country profiles and the 2003 guidelines and are described in paragraph 26 below.

26. Almost all countries made mention of traditional statistics or sectoral indicators including, inter alia, agriculture, demographic, economic, education, environment, health, human settlements, land, poverty, social, technology, tourism and transport. Given the paucity of gender disaggregated data in countries, it is difficult to derive gender-related indicators at the current time. The most common environmental indicators mentioned by countries for all five regions included deforestation, waste management, climate change and air pollution and the individual regions mentioned several other environmental indicators that reflected their regions' particular concerns and/or priorities.

27. Of the countries that submitted country profiles and mentioned indicators, 42 per cent have developed sets of indicators that go beyond the sectoral indicator fields mentioned above, to include sustainability concepts. The development of indicators for sustainable management or development of a sector (e.g., sustainable forest management and sustainable tourism), hereafter referred to as sectoral sustainability indicators, is normally the initial starting point for countries before embarking on full-fledged programmes on indicators of sustainable development.

The Commission indicators of sustainable development framework, which is divided into 15 themes, 38 subthemes and 58 core indicators, is often cited as a model in countries. In the Western Asian region no countries mentioned developing sectoral sustainability indicators.

28. The two areas of sectoral sustainability indicators that were common to the remaining four regions were sustainable forest management and sustainable tourism. In Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and the Americas and the Caribbean, sectoral sustainability indicators have been developed for sustainable agriculture and sustainable fisheries. Sectoral sustainability indicators for sustainable land management were noted by the Asian and the Pacific and the European regions. The Americas and the Caribbean region included sectoral sustainability indicators for sustainable human development. The European region reported on several other sectoral sustainability indicators, including those related to sustainable urban development, sustainable human settlement development, science and sustainable development, sustainable mountain development, sustainable energy and sustainable transport.

2. Institutional issues

29. National institutions and agencies are important in countries for the development of specialized statistics and indicators of sustainable development. Effective coordination between them is equally important in order to promote the best use of limited resources and to avoid duplication of work. Of the countries that submitted country profiles and mentioned indicators, 75 per cent noted the involvement of some national agencies in the development of indicators of sustainable development. The most frequently mentioned national agencies in all regions were ministries of environment and national statistical offices. Other institutions that were involved in indicator programmes/development in most regions were ministries of agriculture, health, forestry, housing, tourism, planning, finance, education, fisheries, lands, water and energy. In addition, ministries of information management, population, labour, transport, urbanization and industry and trade, as well as environmental protection agencies, were mentioned by some countries.

30. Another mechanism for guiding the development and implementation of national indicators of sustainable development is through inter-agency working groups or steering committees. According to the 2002 country profiles, three countries in Africa and one country in Asia and the Pacific had established some form of inter-agency working group or steering committee. In Europe, seven countries reported having a coordinating mechanism. This included a mix of approaches encompassing national commissions on sustainable development, federal councils for sustainable development and interdepartmental steering groups on sustainable development. In the Americas and the Caribbean, five countries mentioned the existence of a coordinating mechanism and the range in their composition was similar to the case in Europe.

31. In the responses to the 2003 guidelines, 29 of the 38 countries that reported mentioned that they have some form of coordinating mechanism, either a national commission or council on sustainable development, a steering committee, an inter-agency/ministerial working group or the equivalent.

3. National programmes/projects for indicators of sustainable development

32. According to the information from the 2002 country profiles, there were significant differences among regions with respect to national programmes/projects for indicators of sustainable development. No African, Asian or Pacific countries reported having an established national programme for indicators of sustainable development, but such a programme is currently under development in one country in Africa and in one country in Asia and the Pacific. In the European region, six countries reported the existence of a national programme or project on indicators of sustainable development. Four countries in the Americas and the Caribbean mentioned the existence of a national programme or project on indicators of sustainable development. In the Western Asian region two countries noted that they had projects for developing indicators of sustainable development at the national level.

33. No general regional differences could be discerned from the information obtained from the 2002 country profiles and the 2003 guidelines for the different regions' involvement in regional or international programmes to develop indicators of sustainable development.

34. With respect to the existence of a set of indicators of sustainable development, it is clear from information obtained from the 2002 country profiles that not many countries have developed such sets. Three countries in the Asian and Pacific region reported that they have developed or are developing a set of indicators for sustainable development. In Europe, seven countries have developed or are developing indicators of sustainable development at the national level.

35. In the responses to the 2003 guidelines, 29 of the 38 countries that reported mentioned that they have a national programme or initiative to develop and/or use indicators for sustainable development, and 27 countries noted their participation in a regional/international programme on indicators of sustainable development. It is noteworthy that out of those reporting 25 countries mentioned that they have either an agreed or draft set of indicators of sustainable development. Table 2 below provides a regional breakdown.

Table 2
Status of development of indicators of sustainable development in countries

Region (number of responding countries)	*National programme or initiative to develop and/or use indicators for sustainable development*	*Participation in a regional/ international programme*	*Set of indicators of sustainable development*		
			Agreed set	*Draft set*	*Other set*
Africa (7)	5	4	2	2	0
Americas and the Caribbean (4)	3	3	1	0	1
Asia and the Pacific (10)	7	6	3	5	0
Europe (15)	13	13	7	4	2
Western Asia (2)	1	1	0	1	0
Total (38)	**29**	**27**	**13**	**12**	**3**

4. Information management

36. It is recognized that knowledge and information are valuable economic assets that are of critical importance in moving towards sustainable development. For information to be useful for making decisions, it needs to be more readily accessible through easily understood statistics and indicators. Information management is important to support the development and regular updating of statistics and indicators. From the 2002 country profiles, the existence of web sites, databases and information systems on indicators of sustainable development were mentioned by countries in the different regions. No major regional differences could be ascertained from the information available. It is clear that when an information system was mentioned it usually referred to an environmental information system or Geographic Information System.

37. The dissemination of information on indicators of sustainable development was limited to three regions with eight countries in Europe, one country in Asia and the Pacific and one country in the Americas and the Caribbean that mentioned that have published reports containing indicators of sustainable development.

5. Challenges

38. In the 2003 guidelines, countries were requested to identify, out of a list of seven, the three most difficult problem areas in the establishment of indicators of sustainable development at the national level. Thirty-four out of the 38 countries responded to this question, although not all listed three problem areas. The most commonly reported problem areas were basic data and/or statistics — quality and quantity, followed by training in methodologies relating to indicators of sustainable development, and thirdly by financial resources. Table 3 provides a regional breakdown.

Table 3
Main challenges faced by countries by region

Problem	***Total number of responses (34)***	*Europe (14)*	*Africa (6)*	*Asia and the Pacific (9)*	*Americas and the Caribbean (3)*	*Western Asia (2)*
Training in methodologies relating to indicators of sustainable development	**14**	3	3	4	2	2
Communication with other agencies responsible for indicators	**9**	6	1	2	0	0
Basic data and/or statistics — quality and quantity	**18**	5	4	7	2	0
Human resources	**12**	5	1	2	2	2
Information management system, including equipment	**4**	0	2	3	0	0
Financial resources	**13**	3	3	5	1	1
Monitoring mechanisms	**11**	3	3	2	2	1

39. Several countries mentioned other challenges they face. For example, European countries noted: the lack of government commitment; the problem related to the comparability of indicators and the methodology when compiling data; the numerous agencies involved in data collection and the lack of time series data; the complexity of the subject and the lack of clear sustainability criteria and goals in some fields; the selection of indicators, lack of an operational definition of sustainable development and concrete targets to measure it; the selection of a limited and meaningful set of indicators; and the promotion of the indicators within government and with the public. In Africa, an additional challenge was the absence of time series data and statistics in the environmental, social and economic fields. The absence of a tradition of exchanging information between institutions that produce this information and the users was also noted as a main hurdle for the calculation and follow-up of the most pertinent indicators. In Asia and the Pacific, a further challenge was the absence of a list of indicators in the official statistical system that allows for the complex evaluation of sustainable development. It was also noted that a large number of existing indicators do not fully reflect real conditions. Cooperation between different spheres of the Government was also noted as a challenge.

III. Indicator-related activities by the Division for Sustainable Development

40. The Division for Sustainable Development has engaged in capacity-building projects to assist in strengthening regional and national efforts in developing indicators of sustainable development, as well as in creating information management systems. Some examples of such activities over the past year include the following: (a) a project on capacity-building in creating information management systems to improve decision-making for sustainable development for Caribbean Small Island Developing States; (b) a regional Caribbean workshop on national sustainable development strategies and indicators of sustainable development; and (c) a regional workshop on national sustainable development strategies for Asia and the Pacific, which included a component on indicators of sustainable development.

IV. Conclusions and way forward

41. **In interpreting the information contained in the present report one should keep in mind both the overall response rate, in particular the 38 responses to the 2003 guidelines, and the fact that countries were not specifically asked to report on indicators of sustainable development in the 2002 country profiles. It is clear, however, that a greater response to the 2003 guidelines would be extremely useful since responses received to date are more focused and complete. Countries are therefore encouraged to complete the guidelines, which will contribute to a more accurate picture of the global status of the development and implementation of indicators of sustainable development, including major trends and information gaps.**

42. **It can be concluded from the information available that much work still remains to be done in the development and implementation of indicators of**

sustainable development throughout the world. Many countries are still in the early stages of establishing programmes on indicators of sustainable development and need to be supported to carry out this endeavour. More coordinating mechanisms need to be established at the national level between institutions to make more effective use of limited resources.

43. **From the limited responses received to the 2003 guidelines, the lack of basic data and/or statistics, in terms of both quality and quantity, is the most fundamental challenge in the development of indicators of sustainable development that countries throughout the world are facing. The second most reported challenge is training in the methodologies relating to indicators of sustainable development. It is clear that more work needs to be undertaken both in the development of methodologies underlying statistics and indicators, as well as in further training and capacity-building. Regional training workshops and capacity-building projects, as well as twinning between countries need to be supported with donor funds and expertise.**

44. **Indicators have an important role to play in assisting countries to make informed policy decisions concerning sustainable development. The development and implementation of indicators at the national level can only take place through the establishment of national programmes, development of sets of indicators, improved communication and cooperation through the establishment of coordinating mechanisms, further methodological development and training, and improved data and statistics underlying the indicators. Partnerships between national, regional and international institutions and organizations will contribute to achieving more reliable and timely indicators to measure progress made in achieving sustainable development.**

Notes

[1] *Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August-4 September 2002* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.II.A.1 and corrigendum), chap. I, resolution 2, annex.

[2] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2003, Supplement No. 9* (E/2003/29), chap. I, sect. A, para.1, draft resolution I.

[3] Report of the meeting of national focal points on improving future national reporting to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, held in New York on 12 and 13 February 2002 (A/CONF.199/PC/4, annex).

[4] www.un.org/esa/sustdev/nat/info/cp2002.htm.

[5] Information relating to this project can be accessed at the following web site: www.un.org/esa/sustdev/natlinfo/process.pdf.

[6] "The reporting process, starting with formulating and sending out guidelines, should begin much earlier than in the past — in spring of the previous year. Ample time should be given for report preparations at the national level so as to allow for participatory approaches, better coordination of inputs and high quality content" (A/CONF.199/PC.4, annex, para. 25).